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Developments in Indochina

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The holidays were marred by a sharp increase in Communist attacks, particularly in the delta, but no serious efforts were made to capture populated areas or cut major highways. General Giap has dropped out of sight in Hanoi. He even missed army day.

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The Soviet ambassador hints that the Pathet Lao may be ready for negotiations on a new coalition government.

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Friction between the Vietnamese and the Khmer Communists in southwestern Cambodia continues.

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VIETNAM

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A High Point for the Holidays

The Communists sharply increased their ground attacks and shellings for about three days last week. Most of the actions occurred in the delta; military activity there reached the highest level since the Paris accord was signed last January. Government outposts in Chuong Thien and Dinh Tuong provinces were the hardest hit. Scores of small villages were shelled, and government rice collection efforts came under renewed pressure. Sporadic clashes were also reported in the region around Saigon.

The high point clearly was timed to coincide with important Communist holidays--the anniversaries of the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese Army--and, perhaps, with the Kissinger-Tho session in Paris. None of the actions reported so far, however, was a serious attempt to capture a population center or cut a major roadway.

The government has made little progress in its effort to retake the border camps lost to the Communists last month. Bad weather and high winds are limiting the air campaign against North Vietnamese defenses at Bu Prang and Bu Bong, and South Vietnamese reconnaissance units report that the Communists are solidly entrenched at the camps. As a result, the South Vietnamese 23rd Division commander is cautiously moving his troops on the ground.

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General Giap Misses Another
Major Turnout

Defense Minister Giap, who over the years has appeared regularly at public functions, last week did not attend the ceremonies marking the 29th anniversary of the founding of the North Vietnamese Army. Except for a few occasions in September and October, Giap has made no public appearances in Hanoi since last July, although he is still the addressee for ceremonial messages from other Communist countries. There are some reports that he has been in poor health for the last six months, and it is also possible that he is in political trouble. Other [] claim he has been traveling abroad as well as in North and South Vietnam.

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LAOS

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A Ray of Hope?

The Joint Central Commission to Implement the Cease-fire Agreement has met six times in plenary session since it was formally convened on November 23, but only minor procedural and administrative matters have been resolved. Moreover, the friendly and businesslike atmosphere that originally characterized these meetings has been clouded by an outbreak of minor, but annoying, cease-fire violations. The Pathet Lao have insisted that negotiations on formation of the new coalition government cannot begin until the commission has dealt with the neutralization of Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

Despite the apparent logjam, there are some encouraging signs that movement toward a new coalition may soon get out of low gear. Prime Minister Souvanna is maintaining regular correspondence with his Communist half-brother Prince Souphanouvong, and also appears to be accelerating behind-the-scenes efforts to marshal diplomatic support for rapid formation of the new government. These efforts may be bearing fruit. Soviet Ambassador Vdovine recently reaffirmed to the US charge in Vientiane that Moscow "unequivocally" supported rapid implementation of the Lao agreements. The ambassador added that he intended to pursue a more active role in the negotiations. Vdovine, who appeared sympathetic to the view that the Pathet Lao were guilty of stonewalling on the political front, said he plans to visit Sam Neua "early in the new year" to obtain a first-hand evaluation of what can be done to expedite setting up the new government.

Of more immediate significance, the Soviet ambassador claimed that he had been told by Soth Phetrasy, head of the Pathet Lao delegation to the joint commission, that Sam Neua had already decided to soften

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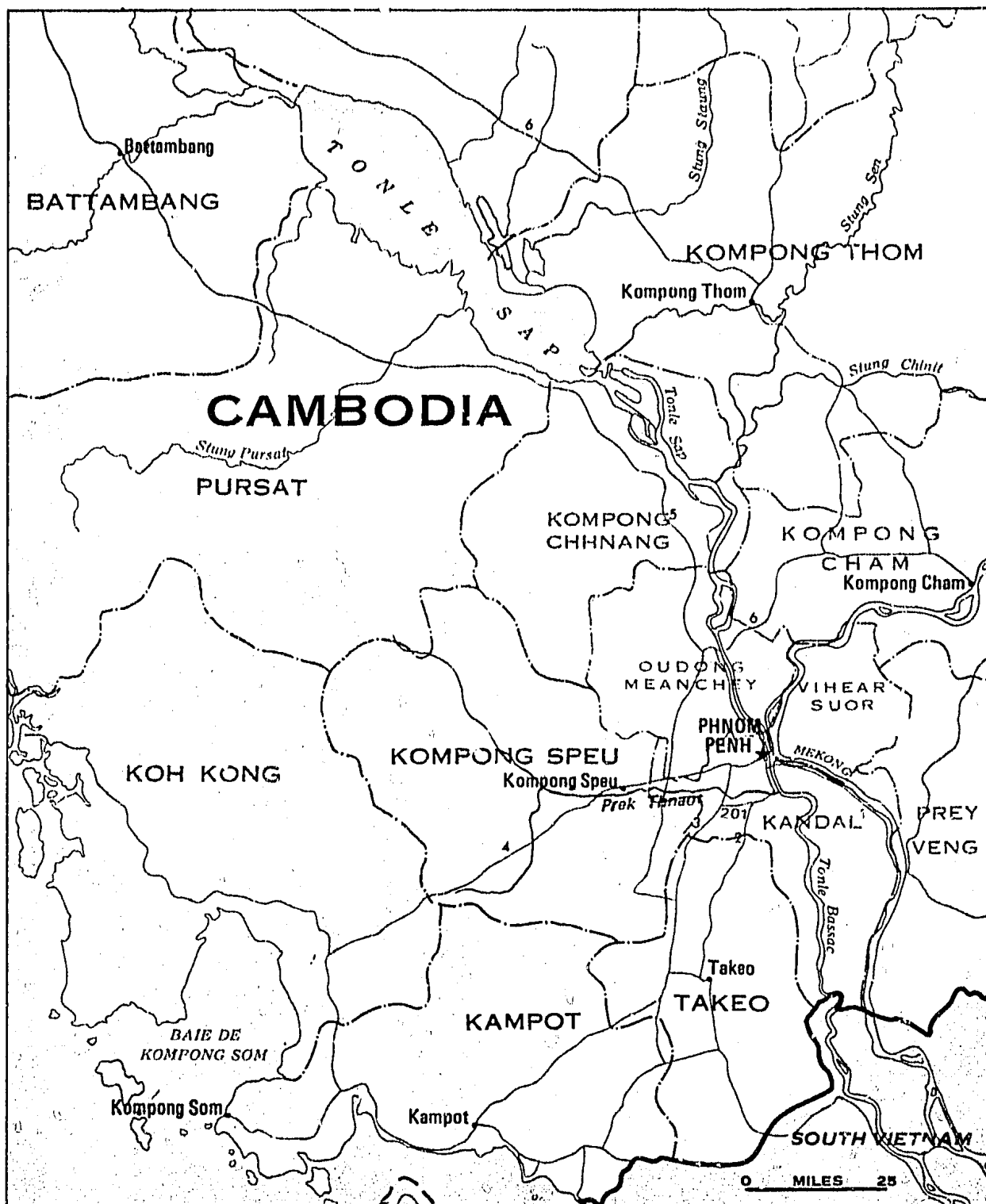
its negotiating tactics in the near future by offering to discuss simultaneously neutralization of the twin capitals and formation of the coalition government. Both recently returned to Vientiane after consultations in Hanoi and Sam Neua. If he is indeed armed with these new marching orders, prospects for early establishment of a coalition government will be considerably improved.

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CAMBODIA

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Bad Blood Lingers on in South-
Western Cambodia

Relations between Khmer and Vietnamese Communists in Kampot and Takeo provinces reached a nadir this summer when the two sides engaged in relatively large-scale fighting. A truce worked out by high-level authorities in mid-August ended the worst of the fighting, but the area along the southern border remains the scene of a good many skirmishes between the rank and file of the two sides.

Although the August agreement provided for a formal delineation of zones of administrative control, both sides have chosen to ignore these terms. Instead, each has attempted to expand its control over territory, population, and economic resources. Local Khmer Communist units have been staging small-scale harassing attacks against Vietnamese units in an effort to push them across the ill-defined border into South Vietnam. Vietnamese troops

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have been ambushing Khmer Communist troops. Nevertheless, casualties have been relatively light.

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